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Follow-up to the World Summit for Social Development: review of relevant United Nations plans and programmes of action pertaining to the situation of social groups

Statement submitted by the International Movement ATD Fourth World, a non-governmental organization in general consultative status with the Economic and Social Council

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is circulated in accordance with paragraphs 30 and 31 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31 of 25 July 1996.

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In this year dedicated to extreme poverty and human rights, the call by the Expert Workshop on Participation and Social Justice for development founded on human rights is essential. This call must be heeded more and more widely, with particular attention to the final report on human rights and extreme poverty, submitted by the special rapporteur to the subcommission of the Commission on Human Rights (E/CN.4/Sub.2/1996/13). The report followed up on the address in 1987 by the late Joseph Wresinski, founder of the International Movement ATD Fourth World, before the Commission on Human Rights, calling for recognition of the poorest as defenders of human rights.

I. Reducing the vulnerability of the poorest

To the definition of vulnerability offered in the report of the Expert Workshop on Ways and Means to Enhance Social Protection and Reduce Vulnerability, the International Movement ATD Fourth World would add two points:

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(a) Extreme poverty makes the family unit terribly vulnerable. While the vulnerability of children fending for themselves is recognized, there must be greater understanding of how deep poverty robs parents of the chance to nurture their own children. Too often, parents who have shown nothing but love for their children are driven from them by the harshness of their lives. Too often, fathers desperate to provide for their families have no choice but to depart. What renders the poorest families so defenceless is the complete breakdown of their human rights. People living in extreme poverty are rarely regarded as members of families but rather as individuals with specific problems and concerns. Solutions are proposed to individuals. And yet the interdependence of the family unit must be respected;

(b) The vulnerability of the poor is the negation of their right to contribute freely to humanity's riches. Reducing their vulnerability requires restoring their rights and ensuring that they have the means to exercise those rights in order to assume their responsibilities. We must abolish the periods of unemployment of the most disadvantaged among workers, by transforming them into "sabbatical times geared to human and cultural progress, times of widely scoped training, including political and religious participation as well as artistic creation", as Joseph Wresinski argued in a working document submitted by the International Movement ATD Fourth World to the World Summit for Social Development, Copenhagen, 1995.

II. Enhancing social protection

In resolution 51/178, on the first United Nations Decade for the Eradication of Poverty, the General Assembly "stresses that ... people living in poverty and their organizations should be empowered by being fully involved in the setting of targets and in the design, implementation, monitoring and assessment of national strategies ... for poverty eradication ..., ensuring that such programmes reflect their priorities". This means that development programmes and strategies for poverty eradication must endure long enough to give hope to the most abandoned people, to enable them to overcome the difficulties inherited from the extreme deprivation that has often been passed on by several generations, and to learn lessons of humanity from them. The more intense and lasting extreme poverty is, the greater the human investment necessary to conquer it.

As a mother living in a shanty said, "We need so much courage, but we will have it because you believe in us. If we fall on our faces, it will be the same for you, because you are with us."

Joseph Wresinski noted that families whose self-confidence had been undermined could not offer faith in life to their children. The poorest families needed the fellowship of other people coming to share their own faith in the future, ... people investing the best of themselves, men and women who would not abandon people after a few years of technical assistance only. The investment of one human being in another was also about learning from the poorest, those who survived only when their own strength enabled them to and who had so much to teach society about fighting exclusion.

III. Partnership with the poorest as the path towards social justice

To strengthen social cohesion, social groups and institutions must move beyond participation to equal partnership with the most underprivileged. The essential conditions of such an equal partnership with the most disadvantaged are: a profound knowledge and

understanding of their daily efforts and aspirations for the future; believe and trust in them; access for them to culture, to ways of imparting their own knowledge and of enriching it through access to other forms of knowledge, and to ways of becoming essential contributors to the future development and progress of our societies and our world.

IV. Rethinking human activity

Ten years ago, Joseph Wresinski called for sharing, not just working time, but also time as a whole and of each person's skills so that the "abnormally accelerated" time of some can converge with the "abnormally slowed" time of others to create a unit of time shared by all. He launched a three-fold challenge for the reorganization of human activity:

(a) To guarantee access for all to the labour market where they can be useful for significant periods of time and work in freedom and dignity;

(b) To guarantee all persons the possibility of being creative and useful at times when they are not employed and to enable the most underprivileged to make those times opportunities for acquiring a universal culture ..., a period for human and cultural advancement through the widest possible training, including trade union, political and religious involvement, and artistic creativity;

(c) To guarantee a fair balance, in the life of every person, of time spent in and out of work.

He called for significant measures to be taken to ensure that the right to employment and culture were irreversibly enshrined in the duties of the State.

The International Movement ATD Fourth World is confident that the member States will continue to pursue the fulfilment of the commitments made at the World Summit so that families mired in poverty may indeed exercise the rights and share the responsibilities which enable them to contribute to the well-being of humankind. Pursuing the essential condition of full partnership with the poorest throughout the world is the path towards social justice, democracy and peace for the generations to come.